Naga Deity Cult in Jammu Region

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Abstract

In Jammu region, we find a continued existence of folk culture in the form of folk deity cult. The folk deities are popularly referred to as Kula devtas and *Kula devis* due to the reason that, the people in the region revere them as family deities. No ritual or ceremony is performed without having first venerated them. Brahmanical (Hindu pantheon) gods are placed second in importance to them Yet this 'Little tradition' is simultaneously co-exists with 'Greater tradition'. More than four hundred folk deities exist in Jammu Region in form of gram devtas and gram devis (Village deities), Naga devtas (snake deities), Shaheed devtas (Martyr deities), and Silabantis (Sati deities) and Aaghat devtas (Exotic deities). Naga deities form an important aspect of this cult. Its study can help us to understand socio-cultural processes in the region.

Key Words: Folk deities, nature, geographical spread, worship, rituals, Form,

Shrines,Social groups.

Naga (serpent) Deities of Jammu Region

Jammu and Kashmir, with its twin capitals at Jammu and Srinagar**,** is the northern most state of India. It comprises of three culturally distinct provinces of Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. This distinctiveness is visible even in their evolution throughout the historical period. Of the three provinces, Jammu is further divided into ten administrative districts of Jammu, Samba, Kathua, Rajouri Poonch, Ramban Kishtwar, Doda Udhampur and Reasi. This province of Jammu together with *Bhimbar, Khari-Kharyali* and *Mirpur(* now part of Pakistan)is taken as one region. Geographically it is identified as a tract lying between River Jhelum and River Ravi that is between Plains of Punjab and the ascending hills of Pir Panjal. The region can be further divided into geographical sub-regions of *The Eastern Plains, the Eastern Hills, the western Plains and the Western Hill* (Census Report of India, 1911, 201).

Jammu region appears to have been inhabited by aboriginal tribes before its contact with Brahmanical culture. The region probably made its first contact with brahmanical culture in Vedic times with the arrival of *Madra* people into the region (Atrey,2008,5). We know that *Sakal* (Sialkot) was the capital of Madra people.[1] Since then the brahmanical culture appears to have penetrated into all the geographical sub-regions of Jammu region depending on its acceptability by the sub-region and the acceptability seems to have been decided largely by physiographical conditions. In the *The Eastern Plains* which includes Jammu proper and erstwhile principalities of *Jasrota, Balaur, Basholi, Babbur* and lower parts of Reasi and Udhampur (popularly called *Duggar illaqa* due to the dominant *Dogra* culture prevailing here), the Brahmanical culture has remained strongest in comparison to other sub-regions(Atrey,2008,7). This area was probably a part of the *Madradesh* and as such was the first to make contact with brahmanical culture. *The Western Plains* comprising *Bhimbar, Khari-Kharyali* and *Mirpur* (Pakistan) together with *Western hills* which include Rajouri, Punch (major part of it is in Pakistan) and Kotli areas was essentially tribal in culture. In the ancient times it was inhabited by tribes like *Abisaras.* It was also known as *Chibal* land after Chib Clan of the area (Atrey,2008,7). The area has largely been Islamised. Earlier Buddhism had also made its way into the region. Probably the Brahmanical culture with its social restrictions could not get along easily with their tribal life. People in the region seem to have been receptive to the religion, which gave them considerable

freedom and could be accommodated with their tribal livelihood. Therefore, Buddhism and Islam could easily take roots here as they went well with their tribal ways. Kishtwar, Bhadarwah and Dacchin areas form *The Eastern Hills* section of Jammu region. Herein the fastness of the mountains surrounding the region, has allowed little interaction with outside world resulting in little Brahmanical penetration.(Atrey,2008,7). In fact the inhabitants of the area have moulded tenets of Brahmanical religion in their own tribal way.

This shows that the region of Jammu has not been completely brahmanised. Except Jammu Plains in the other three sub-regions it is half hearted. Therefore we find regional variation in the spread of Brahmanical culture. This in turn has resulted in the continued existence of the aboriginal or tribal culture in the region. An important attribute of this aboriginal culture is the prevailing cult of folk deities. It is quite interesting that even in the areas where Brahmanical culture has taken deep roots i.e. the eastern plains, (*duggar* area) these deities, as a reminiscent of tribal culture that existed here, maintain their independent existence. These deities are popularly referred to as *Kula devtas* and *Kula devis* as the people in the region revere them as their family deities. No ritual or ceremony is initiated without having first venerated them. These folk deities exist in form of *Naga devtas* (Serpent deities), *gram devtas* and *devis* (Village deities) and *Shaheed devtas* and *Satis* (Martyr deities). Brahmanical (Hindu pantheon) gods are placed

[1] Sailkot is adjacent to Jammu city

second in importance to them. Therefore Little tradition of folk deities co-exists simultaneously with Greater tradition of Brahmanical deities.

The present paper intends to make an inquiry into this Little tradition with focus on the *Naga devtas* (serpent deities).An attempt would be made to highlight the importance of their study to understand socio-cultural processes in the region by discussing their nature, form ,shrines, rituals and social groups associated with them. The paper is based on the field work done by using oral history techniques. It involved the use of questionnaire to get the first hand information about the deities (the questionnaire is attached as appendix I). With the information thus acquired, the second stage involved the visit to shrines of some of major deities and documenting the conduct of the rituals and other ceremonies.[2] The field work has led to the documentation of more than seventy major and minor *naga* deities in the region. On the basis of the data collected the following analysis has been reached. The details regarding documented deities have been attached as appendix II.

Since the days when human being lived a life of hunter and food gatherer, in pre-state times, we find him propitiating nature and his surroundings in form of a variety of deities. This was probably due to the fact that wandering about in the wilds, herding his quadruped wealth and looking for greener pastures, he was confronted with unfriendly nature (Handa, 2004, 80).Whenever the primitive man struck on the field, a furious snake stung him to the painful death. Such incidents might have

[2] It was difficult to make visit to the shrines of many deities in the far flung villages due to their being located in militancy infested areas especially in the regions of Bhadrawah, Kistwar, and hilly areas of Udhampur.

been too numerous and frequent to overwhelm his naive mind with incomprehensible terror. (Handa, 2004, 80) He could think of no other way to relieve himself from that fear of certain death than of propitiation and appeasement (Handa, 2004, 80). The fear of snake bite while digging the earth for cultivation led to its propitiation. Moreover as the master of underworld, serpent were perceived to be lords of all springs, ponds , lakes and other water resources that sustain life on the earth. Therefore man started offering sacrifices to the serpents (*Nagas*) in number of ways for peaceful co existence and blessings. This resulted in emergence of a number of *Naga* deities in each tribal group. Fables arose populating communities with serpent gods, demons and heros who watched, judged and manipulated the lives of men of different classes and areas. Festivals came to be celebrated to placate the apparently moody deities who could send famines, wars and pestilence as well as good harvest, peace and prosperity. In fact the blessings of the deity came to be required at every auspicious occasion. Through the historical period when tribe got peasantised and territorialized, same deities got accepted into the new society as well. Therefore, those tribal communities who took snake as central object of their cult system came to be known as *Naga* tribes (Handa, 2004, 80)

In Jammu region *Naga* deities constitute a major generic form among the folk deities of the region**.** The major *naga* deities include Basak naga *(Vasuki naga), Bhair devta, Kai devta, Baba Surgal, Mansar devta, Bhudsar devta*, *Tansar devta* and *Shankhpal* who are worshipped all over

the region. On the other hand *Sukuhal devta, Daule devta, Narde devta, Kurchit devta ,Masal devta,Pagan devta* etc. are the minor *naga* deities whose influence does not extend beyond their respective village. Apart from the aboriginal *naga* deities, some anthropomorphic form of serpent deities like *Raja Mandlikh*, is also worshipped. This form appears to have come from outside the region and got assimilated into the local deity cult.

Naga devtas of Bhadrawah region:

Bhadrawah appears to have been the centre of Naga culture in ancient times. The main Naga deity of the region, *Basak Naga* resides there. He is probably the *puranic Vasuki Naga*, the king of *Nagas*. It is said that *Basak naga* originally lived in Kashmir, but owing to some dispute with Vishnu, (main deity of Hindu Pantheon) *Garuda* (vehicle of *Vishnu*) chased him out of Kashmir. He therefore took refuge in Kund Kapla peak in Bhadarwah. This is probably a brahmanic explanation of the fact that cult of *vasuki* could not survive with advent of *vaishanvism* in Kashmir and its followers established it in Bhadarwah. In Bhadarwah, *Bhadarkali*, the presiding deity of the valley, gave way to *Basak* cult. The fact that they are considered sister and brother refers to co-existence of two cults in the Bhadarwah valley. Interestingly the cult of *Basak naga* spread in chamba, Kullu and elsewhere in Himachal Pradesh (neighbouring state) from Bhadrawah (Handa, 2004, 105). *Basak naga* is believed to have twenty sons born out of his three wives. It is an interesting fact that his sons are the major and minor *naga devtas*. Probably *Basak* cult being

more powerful assimilated other naga deities into its fold and legitimised them as his sons.

The main festival held in the honour of *Basak naga* is the annual pilgrimage, called *basak naga yatra*, which starts on the second day of the bright half of Hindu month of bhadon (June-July) from Bhadrawah. It is led by the chief priest of the *Basak* temple at Bhadrawah and devotees set on a two days arduous march to *Kailash Kund* (23 km away).A big fair is held on the banks of the lake (abode of *Basak naga*). People circumbulate the lake and make offerings to the *naga* deity on the northern corner of the lake. *Basak naga* has several other temples built in vernacular style in and around Bhadrawah apart from the main shrine in Bhadrawah city. In the sanctum of the temple are human size idols of Basak naga and Jimutvahan made of black granite.[3] The shrines of basak naga are also located at Ganth, Nalthi, Duddu, basantgarh and Gandoh area. *Santan naga* and *Savar naga* (brothers of *Basak naga*) are also worshipped in Bhadrawah area.

Subar naga and *Thubhu naga* are the other important serpent deities of Bhadrawah region. The ancient temple of *Subar Nag* on the sprawling *Subar* pasture opens for *Darshans* on first of Baisakh (April 13) every year. The location of the temple is such that Bhadrawah town though miles away can be seen from here. The temple houses an ancient idol of *Subar Nag*. Like the idol the temple of Subar Nag also appears to be an ancient one which fell victim to the frenzy of militants and was burnt

[3] According to the tradition associated with *Basak naga* it was *Jimutvahana* who saved him from *Garuda* by offering his own flesh.

during mid nineties when militancy was at its peak. Now temple of made of cement has come up. Thousands of devotees from the surrounding areas including *Chinta, Bhalra, Barasua*, *Chirala* and Bhlara throng the place and celebrate Baisakhi every year. Another festival is held in the temple on the annual *Jater* of Chinta that falls in Bhadon (July). This day before dawn, people in large numbers reach *Subar* Temple carrying wooden *Mashals (*wooden torch*)* in their hands. These *Mashals* are put one on another in the form of a camp fire that soon turns into a big heap of glowing coal, which is destroyed by the priests bare foot amidst chanting of religious slogans. During the process the *pujaris* make forecast, which generally comes true. It is also believed that the newlywed young man who's Mashal reaches the compound of the temple first gets a male baby from his wife due to the blessings of the deity.

Thubu Nag is yet another deity that is famous for blessing his devotees with a male baby. Its temple is situated on a hill a little above the Bhaderwah- Jai Road that separates Bhadrawah from Chinta valley.

On the right side of Bhaderwh-Jai pedestrian road is situated the temple of *Nagni Mata*, which is considered as sister of *Thubu Naga*. People in large numbers, in the form of procession converge at *Nagni Mata* Temple every year on first *Baisakh* (April) for paying obeisance to their deity Goddess. On this occasion *langer (*community Kitchen*)* is organized and meat of the lambs that are sacrificed in honour of the Mata is served as *prasad*. The other minor naga deities of Bhadrawah include *Kilru naga devta*(Tadkai,Bhalesa), *Tarwat naga devta*(Duwah), *Bhot nagadevta*

(Halot), *Mehul nagadevta*(manoka), *Mehe naga devta* (btohali) and *Kansar naga devta* (Jad, Paddar).

Naga devtas of Jammu Plains:

In the plains of Jammu, the most important Naga deity is *Bhair devta*. He is revered as family deity by some of the major Brahmana and Rajput clans of the region such as those of *Dharmath, Palasar, Samnotras*, and *Jamwal pandits*. According to a tradition *Bhair devta* is credited with bringing river Tawi (major source of water to Jammu city) to Jammu. As the story goes, it is said that one day *Basak Naga* announced that any of his sons who would bring water to Jammu shall be declared as his heir-apparent. Therefore all his sons tried to bring a water source to Jammu. *Bhair devta*, it is believed, went to Kailash and brought Tawi to Jammu. The tradition further tells us that when *Bhair* was announced as the heir-apparent, it aroused the jealousy of his other step brothers. So they caught hold of him, put him in a cage and drowned it in Chenab. The Cage reached Kutch region whose ruler got him released and gave his daughter to him in marriage. However, when called back by *Raja Basak*, he came back to Jammu and lived in a palace on banks of river Tawi.

Another tradition connects him with the battle of Ten kings, which took place in Early Vedic times, wherein *Bhair devta* is said to have been defeated by *Sudas.* This appears to be an attempt by his followers to place him in ancient times. The shrines of *bhair devta* are spread over whole of Jammu but the most prominent one includes shrine at Kandoli

near Nagrota, at Karoaue village in Udhampur and Khatruhi village in Jindrah(Udhampur district).In all these shrines there is a water source in form of a pond called dabbar in local dialect. The deity is believed to be residing in the pond. No fishing is allowed to be done here rather the fish in the pond is considered as deity itself and is fed with offerings by the devotees. In the shrine deity resides in form of Saungal (Iron chains).

Mansar devta is another important deity of the region and enjoys the status of family deity of many clans in Jammu region. His main shrine is at Mansar village near a lake named Mansar in Sambha district. In the shrine deity is depicted as coiled snake in sitting position. The deity is said to be residing in the lake where devotees offer food to fish. Here again fishing is not allowed as deity is believed to reside in form of fish. Due to the presence of the Lake (which is two and half kilometre long and one and a half Kilometre wide) it is a major tourist spot in the region.

Nagas devta as the lord of water source is believed to be residing in the water. Therefore the water resource itself is considered as abode of the deity whether in form of waterfall or a pond (dabber, in local dialect) as stated earlier. The fish therein is taken as an incarnation of the deity and is held sacred and the offering is made to it. Those who indulged in harming the water life have to suffer the wrath of the deity. Probably this phenomenon was an attempt to preserve the nature and its valuable life. However it is difficult to say whether it was a community or an individual effort. Fish is known to be a source of cleansing water. So probably it was an effort to save the agent of purification of water so essential for

living. In a similar way the forest land surrounding the shrine of Naga deity is not allowed to be disturbed. It belongs to the said deity. Except for the bona fide use in the temple, no tree can be cut or the ambience of the area under possession disturbed. This also probably refers to a kind of environmental protection.

Kai devta, another son of *Basak naga*, is important naga deity of the Chenab valley sub region. He is considered as the ruler of the region. His main shrine is at *Nor* village in Akhnur tehsil. His shrines are found spread in Reasi area as well. He is worshipped in form of *Saungal* and *Mohara* (kind of a hero stone). *Kai devta* is credited with having brought Chenab (*Chanderbanga*) to Akhnur. This is a part of the tradition mentioned earlier with respect to bringing river to Jammu. It is said that *Kai* on his part tried to bring Chenab to Jammu but while bringing it down to Jammu, he fell asleep at Akhnur. When he woke up, he came to know that *Bhair* had already brought Tawi River to Jammu. So he released Chenab in Akhnur itself. It is pertinent to mention here that many other Naga deities are also credited with having brought various water streams in one or the other part of the region. It appears that since naga tribes ruled over the region, some of their people may have worked for the welfare of the people especially in the field of irrigation. After their death they were probably raised to the status of the deity. This points some kind of ancestor worship. *Sumal devta* (*Sumah* village), *Khugan devta* and *Tada devta* are the other naga deities which have been

mapped in Akhnur area but author has not been able to gather much information about them.

Naga Deities Of Ramban area:

ShanhkPal devta is revered in *Laddar* hill region of Ramban district. His importance can gauged from the fact that we find his reference in *Nilmant Purana* and *Rajatarangini* of *Kalhana*. His main shrine is in Laddar area and he is the family deity of *Bhutyal* Rajputs.

More recently a minor *naga* deity called *Gunha devta* has come into prominence. His shrine is located in Karnaue village near Patnitop (a major tourist place in the region). His influence was initially limited to few surrounding villages but because of thousands of tourists coming to the place its importance is increasing and a small shrine of naga devta has got converted into a huge structure. *Triman naga* and *Leet naga* at Jatgali in Ramban are the other important deities of the area.

Naga Deities of Udhampur and Ramnagar area:

In Udhampur and Ramnagar area, many important naga deities are located. *Sukhal naga(sukul valley),Shankhpal naga devta* at pancheri, *Paagan naga*(sadi village, Reasi), *Sankeri naga devta* (Udhampur), *Margadha devta*(Sukul), *Laudana devta* (Rattyan), *Dhola naga devta*(sher-sundwal,Reasi) are the important deities of Udhampur. Apart from *Shankhpal naga* most of these deities are worshipped in

surrounding area only and they have not yet attained the status of regional deities but exist as family and village deities only.

In Ramnagar it is *Nareda devta*(tandal village), *Tamryan devta* are significant deities. Tamryan devta is worshipped by many clans of Ramnagar like *Sangra(Kshtriyas), Monter* (*Mahajans*), *Padha (Brahmans*) as their family deity. His influence extends to udhampur and Bandralta as well.

Naga devta is also worshipped in the form of anthill (snake usually lives in deserted anthill)) living beneath the earth. The deity is popular in the form of Baba *Surgal dev*. So wherever the burmi is found, it is considered sacred as the seat of the said deity and people feed the snake family therein with milk on special occasions and do not disturb them. This practice highlights the concept of peaceful co-existence of human and animal life and the awareness of the same among the people of the region.

Raja Mandlikh or *Gugga pir* is the anthropomorphic form of *naga* deity cult in the region. The naga cult associated with anthropomorphic representation is not indigenous to the region but was introduced during later medieval period when many Rajput families are believed to have migrated to the region under hostile conditions in their homeland. The gradual penetration of those families in the interior region prompted introduction of *Gugga* cult. *Raja Mandlikh* (the headless one) or *Gugga pir* is deified as the snake demi-god especially for the occult safety

against the snakebite and for the cure, if one is bitten. He is always represented seated astride on the *Nila Ghora* (blue horse).His shrines are found scattered all over the region and is worshipped by all castes and creed without any distinction. He is the family deity of many sub-castes especially belonging to lower strata of the regional society like *thappa* sub caste among scheduled caste.

Reasons for worship:

All the deities discussed above are worshipped as family deities for protection against natural clamities and to get favours in form of agricultural prosperity, cattle wealth, family prosperity and progeny. *Thubu Naga devta* of bhadarwah is famous for blessing his devotees with male baby. *Triman naga* and *Leet* of Jatgali in Ramban are said to bless devotees with good rains and cattle welfare. Basak naga is worshipped in Duddu area for good rains. It is said that *Basak naga* protects that area from famine.

Form of the Naga Deities:

The naga devtas in the region are represented mostly in *Pindi or Mohara* (non iconic) form and *Saungal* (iron chains). The naga devta is believed to exist in form of *Saungal* and the dowala (mediator between deity and devotee) invokes him by striking Saungal of the deity against his body. *Mohara* is a kind of hero stone on which image of the deity is carved out. Since these images are not inspired by any aesthetic or intense religious urge, but only by customary cultic requirement, these are generally crude, with the bold folkish touch and rustic spontaneity. The deities like

Tansar devta (karuha village near Katra) and *Mansar devta(*mansar village) exist in non-iconographic form only i.e. '*Pinddirupa*'. As against this the deities like *Bhair devta*, *Tamyran devta* (Ramnagar) and *Badsar devta* (Patwarlali, Reasi) exist in iconic form as well. This variation in representation of the deities depends on the extent of the brahmanical influence that has worked on the form of the deities. Moreover the influence of anthropomorphic cults like that of *Gugga devta* also cannot be overlooked.

Shrines of the Deities:

Like other folk deities of the region, Naga deities are also enshrined in the structures called *Dehras. Dehra* is a kind of miniature temple form whose height varies between three meters to one inch. There's hardly any space for a person to sit inside while in some *dehras* a person or two can sit inside to perform the rituals. (Atrey, 2008, 21) The deities who have achieved the status of regional deity and have come under the influence of brahmanical culture have *Shikhra* style shrines. Probably their Dehra got converted into huge temple as a result of extended patronage. The *Shikhra* style temple is made of both in wooden and concrete depending on the kind of the raw material available. Therefore we find *shikhra* style temple in wood in the hilly regions and of brick or stones in the plains. (Atrey,2008,21) These temples and *deharis* are usually found situated near some natural resource water strain, small tank, and ponds or in deep forests, top of the hills etc.

Festivals and Rituals connected with naga deities:

The festivals celebrated in the honour of these are mostly connected with agricultural prosperity. The most important festival is *Kharke**.*** When the new crop has been reaped, first offering is made to family deity (*naga devta*) accompanied by various rituals. ***Male*** or annual congregation is another important festival where families worshipping same deity, assemble at its shrine and perform traditional rituals. During the male of a deity, an important ritual is performed which is known as ***Jatra***. In *Jatra* ritual, a medium *dowala* goes into trance and communicates with the deity. He is a religious professional capable of having direct experience of possession and ecstasy. When in a state of possession and ecstasy he is believed to communicate with the deity, discern and communicate its wishes and suggest corrective measures to alleviate the sufferings of the person affected. *Jatra* of *Bhair devta* takes place in the month of *Margshira* on *Poornima.* The *Jatra* of *Tansar naga devta* is held on *Nirjala Akadshi* at *Karuah* village in Reasi.

During the Jatra of Naga devta, a folk dance, called *Kudd* is performed. *Kudd* is an elaborate nocturnal or day time dance. Men folk are the dancers. Women may take part in the dance when it is held not in honor of the deity. Six accompanists play upon their traditional instruments, *narsingha*, drums called *Dounce,* flutes and *jang*. The accompanists are called *Bajantries*. They practically hold the key to the very pacing and progression of the dance. The movements of the dancers are regulated by the change of raga by the musicians. When the dance reaches its climax, the *Bajantries* play eerie tunes and the slow and sluggish dancers catch up with the rapid music. The *Chella,* jingling a bunch of iron latches and

brass tumblers strung to a siring walks leisurely on the live embers. In trance he beats his back with the iron chains. Some *Chellas* pierce their wagging tongues with knives or nails.

Sometimes, especially when *Kudd* takes place during night time, a big fire is made by lighting a pile of fire wood around which the dance is performed. *Kudd* is performed in a circle form around the leaping flames. When the dance is held during day time, fire is made in tripod stands which are placed outside the dancing arena. In Bhadrawah area, *Kudd* folk dance is popularly called *Deako* dance, while as in Siraj area they simply called it *Kudd*.

During the conduct of the rituals of the deity, Karaks are sung in the honour of the deity. *Karak* is the religious ballad which highlights the heroic deeds of the deity. They are sung by the folk singers called *gardis.* Every deity has his own designated *gardis* who sing *karaks* to him. *Karaks* connected with *Naga devta* are important to understand many aspects of socio- cultural processes in the region. Karaks associated with *Baba Bhair, Baba Surgal*, and *Basak naga* provide us with a lot of information on the various tribes and communities that dwelt in the region in the earlier period, for which we have no data available This is especially in case of the *Naga* and *Yaksha* tribes who once inhabited this region but now they cannot be located in the present population.[4] *Naga* tribe is believed to have been dominant tribe in the region at some stage of historical period. The narratives in the ballads provide us with lot of information on the *Nagas* and their tribal character.

Likewise the existence of *Yaksha* tribe is evident from the narratives in the ballads, especially from that of *Vasuki Naga devta* and *Bhair Naga devta.*[5] This information, when corroborated with evidence of shrine of Yaksha deity in the *Hiranagar tehsil* confirms it.[6] This also leads us to think that the village names such as *Jakh Badh, Jakh tala, Jakh-a-Jadha*

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[4] Some of the *Thakkar Rajput* families living in *Nagot* area of Reasi claim to be *Nagavamsi* and call themselves *Chandravamsi Thakkar Rajputs*. It appears that due to invading tribes, they left their original land in Bhadrawah and migrated in search of a secure shelter, along the course of river Chenab (*Chanderbanga*). They finally settled down at Nagot. As to their claim for being *Chandravamsi Thakkar*, it seems to be an example of sanskritisation. Probably in their new home, they were unable to hold on to their tribal character and got merged into the brahmanical fold.[?] On the other hand some sections of *Nagas* who continued to live in Bhadrwaha region, it appears, could not gain that status and were reduced to the lower strata of the society by the invading tribes. Many of the *megh* families living in Bhadrwaha actually seem to be *Nagavamsi*

[5] "Eighty four sons, Grandsons Raja Called Looking For Bhair ! Find he could not! Trembling wazir Yaksh! Lie did he tell! "This excerpt is from the Ballad of Baba Bhair devta. See NilamberDev Sharma and Khari singh Madhukar (Ed.) *Dogri Lok Geet* vol-II, Jammu &Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages,Jammu,1990. P.14-18

[6] This is the only Yaksh Shrine to be found in the region.

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may have been corrupt form of *Yaksha* and these villages may have been associated with *Yaksha* tribe

The Karak of *Raja Mandlikh* tell us that the deity came from outside with migrating tribes and got assimilated into the local deity cult. Karak can be used to gather useful information about the migration of the tribes into the region as we know that deities do not travel by themselves but they migrate with tribes and social groups. The cult of *Gugga devta* or *Raja Mandlikh* has come from Rajputana region and it exists in Himachal region as well. So if a comparative analysis of ballads prevalent these area is made it can help us to study the path of migration of both the deity as well as the tribe, which brought it.

Social Groups associated with rituals and other activities*:*

The persons associated with the performance of rituals at the shrines of the naga devtas are called ***Karkuns.*** The foremost is the **Priest**. He is called called ***Bojaki*** in the plains and as ***Pran*** in the hilly pockets. The status of the priest is usually hereditary but a new one can be appointed as wished by the deity. He mostly belongs to the Thakkur sub caste. Some of the priests at certain shrines are from low caste as well. This is contrary to the brahmanical tradition wherein only a person from

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Brahman caste can officiate as a priest. Therefore we find *lal thakkur* priest at the shrine of Badsar *devta, Anthmia Thakkur* at *Bhair devta* shrine, whereas at *Bhudar Devta* shrine it is person from *Megh caste (low* caste*)*. The job of the priest is to conduct Puja at the shrine. He is entitled to a part of the offering made to the deity by the devotees.

Dowala is the second important person in the performance of rituals. He acts as the communion between deity and devotee as stated above. There can be many *dowalas* of the deity but only one priest.

Gardis rank next in hierarchy. They are from the lowest strata of the society and belong to Dum *Jati*. The job of the *Gardi* is to beat the drum during the puja performance and sing *karaks* in honour of the deities. *Gardis* are known by the name of Nadiyals in hilly pockets of the region especially in Udhampur area. The caretaker of the shrine is called ***Bhandari.*** He is responsible for maintaining the records of income and expenditure. He is also the in charge of the belongings of the shrine. ***Nishanchi*** is a person who helps to locate the designated place of the deity or his lost mohara through his supernatural knowledge. Apart from these important persons, the *Karkuns* also include ***Nagada*** (drum) beater, ***Masalachi*** (torch bearer) and **flag bearer**.

The drawing of persons from different castes to work in the honour of the deity shows how the caste relations are arranged and caste distinctions have been harmonized.

Now days the shrines management is being run by organizations involving people of same clan or caste whose *kula* deity respective *devta*

is. Therefore people are largely by passing the age old arrangement of the social relations.

Concluding Remarks:

The Naga deities form an important aspect of the folk deity cult in the region. These deities exist in both non-iconic and iconic form. The study of the mapped deities show that their major concentration has largely been in the eastern hills, especially in Bhadarwah, Udhampur Ramnagar and Jammu. Another interesting aspect of these deities is that many of them are worshipped in form of *Kula devta, grama, devta* and *Naga devta* simultaneously e.g. *Bhair devta* enjoys the status of Naga deity, family deity and folk deity. This shows that a deity who was basically a village deity has attained the status of folk deity. This may have been due to the extended patronage of the people in the region. Here the role of the social group whose deity it is also cannot be overlooked. Further investigation can help us to understand the change in the status of a deity from a *kula* deity to that of folk or regional deity. They enjoy some kind of hierarchy among themselves on the basis of patronage. In this way they also reflect the levels of governance among them. The lowest in hierarchy is the deity who enjoys status as *Kula* (family) deity only. Next in hierarchy is *Naga devta* enjoying the status of a village deity whose power does not extend beyond the village for example *Laudana devta* is the deity of Rathyan village in Udhampur. Further in hierarchy is the sub regional deity such as *Tamryan devta* is the deity of *Udhampur* region. At the regional level we can quote the examples such as *Bhair devta and Mansar devta*. Beyond regional level lie the deities who have attained

Pan-Indian popularity, the example being *Basak naga.* Therefore study of the form of these deities, the architecture of their shrines, the Rituals and social groups connected them and their oral traditions gives us an important insight into the socio-cultural and religious processes in the region. This study becomes all the more important in light of the fact that there is meagreness of conventional historical sources in the region. Hence some aspect of regional history with reference to tribes, worshipping modes can be reconstructed with help of alternative historical source in form of Naga deity cult.

Notes: